"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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## THE CHRISTIAN AND SOCIAL REFORM

By Samuel Hugh Moffett*

The subject of Christians and social reform is difficult and sometimes controversial, but it is a subject which we who are caught up here in the midst of a revolution hardly dare to ignore. As a matter of fact, any of you who have contacts with students know that it is a question which is physically impossible to ignore. The questions come pouring in on us every day: Of what use is the Church to society? Is Christianity the opiate of the people? Can a Christian work for social reform? Can Christians take part in the revolution?

What is the really basic question? Sometimes it is wrongly, I think, put this way: What is the real business of the Church--to save souls or to save society? And the usual answer is, "Why to save souls, of course. Look at the Early Church. It ignored society. Its business was to save souls. Later, when it got corrupt, it tangled up in politics and set out to save society. But what was the result? The Dark Ages!"

That is a very common answer and a frequently used object lesson, but it is not quite true. Furthermore, the Christian should not be dropped on the horns of that dilemma: Which is he going to save--souls or society? The Christian should answer, "Neither." He doesn't save souls; souls are saved by the Holy Spirit. Neither can he save society; that will be the work of the triumphant Christ. I think we must put the basic question in a different form. Perhaps we will get farther in our thinking on the difficult subject if we ask, not, "Which is my job--to save souls or society?" but rather, "What is my responsibility for souls? And what is my responsibility as a Christian for society?" It is the second question which we are to discuss here.

The first thing to do is to look at the record and see what light the Word of God and the history of the Church throw on the perplexing problem of the Christian's relation to a sinful society in an unredeemed world.

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Social Gospel in the Old Testament

At the outset we must avoid the temptation to begin with the New Testament. It was the Old Testament which was the first Bible of those early Christians, and the Word of God in the Old Testament does anything but turn its back on social problems. Look at the Mosaic Law, one of the oldest and at the same time one of the most advanced pieces of social legislation in existence. Read what God has to say about land reform, for example, in Leviticus 25, with its provisions guarding against landlords' gaining permanent possession of too much land. Or read what God has to say against economic oppression of the poor through the mouth of his prophet Amos:

"Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fall, saying, When will the new moon be gone that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit? That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat? The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of their works." (Amos 8:4-7)

It is clear that Old Testament believers were without excuse if they ignored God's will for them, not just in the temple but in business. We can't even say that the God of the Old Testament was not interested in politics. Of course he was concerned with individual souls, but more than that God's will had clear expression. He was concerned with a society. He was concerned with the nation of Israel.

Social Gospel of Christ

But, you say, that was the old dispensation. With the coming of Christ all things are become new. In the New Testament the atmosphere is changed. Jesus goes straight to the heart of things. He came to save sinners, not society. He dealt with the problems of the heart, not with politics.

That is all very true. Jesus Christ's unconcern, his indifference almost, with the overwhelming injustices of Roman imperialism and Roman slave economy is a source of great embarrassment to modern preachers of a purely social gospel. They can't quite forgive the Great Example for wasting time calming the storms on Galilee and in the human heart when he might have been lobbying at the Roman court or getting out the vote in Galilee.

Some try to rationalize Jesus' passive acceptance of Roman oppression. They say that however much he looked like a harmless fanatic underneath, underground, he was a secret revolutionary. When a reactionary betrayed him, he died --but died a martyr of the revolution. A friend of mine has pointed out to me that really just the opposite is true. Jesus clearly faced and refused three major temptations to revolution. This was the temptation in the wilderness. There was the temptation to find a materialist solution. "Turn the stones into bread," said the devil. And there was the temptation to bring in the revolution by force. "Summon the legions of the angels by throwing yourself down from the temple." And finally there was the temptation to find a solution that leaves out God. "Turn from God and worship me," said the devil. These are the temptations that Jesus overcame. And again, at the end of his ministry, he says very clearly, "My kingdom is not of this world." That sentence alone should be enough to discredit forever the modern attempt to bring in the kingdom of God by social reform.

But to run to the other extreme and say that the gospel is altogether other-worldly and that Jesus Christ had no concern for the physical and social ills of the world is to distort the clear teaching of the Scriptures. It is true that Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone," but he fed the multitudes. It is true that he said, "Take no thought for the body," but he healed the sick. In fact, he thought these forms of social service important enough to warrant a display of miracle-working power.

It is objected at this point, sometimes, that social service is not social reform and that Christ gave no blueprint for a Christian social order but left society pretty much as he found it and that, therefore, we have no real right to dabble in reform movements or schemes for social betterment. That is nonsense. It is like saying that Jesus gave us no systematic theology, so we had better close up our seminaries or stop teaching people to believe in the Trinity because the word is not in the Bible. The word is not there, but the truth is very clear.

In the field of social action, likewise, the pattern is not in the Scripture, but the principles are there. Even more than principles, there is a command, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." This is the Christian's commission for social reform. The history of the social impact of the Church on the world is simply the story of how Christians have tried to work out in their lives and in the world in which they live just what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself. In the New Testament the principles of social reform are love and justice; and the command is, "Love."

Charity of the Early Church

That was enough for the Church of the Apostles. It was not afraid of a social gospel. In our very first glimpse of the little church in Jerusalem we are struck at once with the fact that these people took the social implications of the gospel in dead seriousness. The gospel made a social difference to them.

"And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need." (Acts 2:44-45)

Those verses bother us a little today. The love-communism of the Early Church somehow makes us uneasy. But I have no intention of trying to make too much out of this. Notice that the right to property was not denied. Peter says to Ananias, "The land was yours." Notice also that it was a communism of consumption, not of production. Notice, and mark well, that it was voluntary. And above all, notice that it failed. It left the Jerusalem congregation impoverished and dependent--as we learn in Acts and the Epistles--on the charity of more practical-minded churches. But one point I do want to make of this reference is that these first Christians accepted without question the fact that the gospel had something to say about how men live with each other in society. They were not afraid of social experiments, even radical ones. They were not afraid to take the Christian principles of love and justice and apply them directly to the social structure of the society in which they lived. In justice they respected the rights of the property-holder--only the man who wanted to, gave. But in love they shared all things and gave to all men as every man had need.

However, the real answer of the Early Church to the problems of its

society was not communism. Lactantius, one of the church fathers (about 280 A.D.) puts the case against communism rather bluntly, "The ownership of property contains the material both of vices and virtues, but communism contains nothing else but license for vices." (Calvin's Institutes, III, xxii, 7)

No, the church's answer was not communism but charity, a simple but thoroughly Christian social program that astounded the ancient world. By 250 A.D. the church in Rome, even in persecution, was supporting 1,500 widows and distressed. A little later the church at Antioch reported a social welfare program boasting total support of 3,000 widows and virgins, relief for the needy and unemployed, hospitality for strangers, a daily bread-line, and even a used-clothing department. One Roman emperor, Julian, who hated Christians and all they stood for, was forced to declare in reluctant admiration, "These godless Galileans feed not only their own poor but ours also."

Early Christian writers pursued this advantage by pointing out to the Roman persecutors how much Christian charity was doing for the nation: it was taking care of widows and orphans, the weak, the poor, the oppressed. It ransomed slaves and ministered to prisoners. Like Jesus, Christians loved little children and cared for the sick. We like to remember the Council of Nicaea for its great witness to orthodoxy--the Nicene Creed. It should also be remembered, I think, for confirming that truth in Christian service; it should be remembered for its order to the churches to establish hospitals in each chief city and town, asking that these hospitals make provision for the care of abandoned children. Not a very startling social program, perhaps. No, it is not, unless you contrast it with the rest of society in cruel and ancient Rome, where the sick and weak were often left to rot and unwanted children thrown away to die.

Justice and the Growing Church

"Not so in a Christian order," said Tertullian. "The only limit to Christian charity," he said in those early days, "is the need of the people." Its only limit the need of the people! That has a familiar ring to it these days. It is the model for this famous sentence from the Communist Manifesto of 1848, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Marxism borrowed a basic social principle of the Early Church: Christian charity. And if to the poor and oppressed people of the world it sounds like a new gospel let us as Christians hide our heads in shame that we have surrendered to others, who honor not the name of Christ, a part of the Good News that is the gospel of Christ.

But is charity enough? William Temple, late Archbishop of Canterbury, tells of seeing not many years ago, during the depression, a parade of unemployed workers marching the streets under a banner bearing these words, "Damn your charity; we want justice." Charity without justice only washes the face of society. What is the Christian attitude toward the injustices that make charity necessary? It is all very well for a persecuted church to offer charity, for that is about the only social program such a church is in a position to offer, but when it comes to a position of power and influence, what should it do about the world's injustices?

To attack entrenched injustice is a step beyond social service. It is social reform. Where social service alleviates, social reform changes. To the credit of the Christian Church let it be said that with the end of persecution it stepped beyond charity into the fight for justice. It did not abandon the principle of charity, for justice without charity is a frightening thing, but it de-

manded justice. Justice for the weak: it demanded and won the legal right to protect the weak and free unjustly treated slaves. Justice for prisoners: it demanded and won laws forbidding such brutal treatment of prisoners as branding in the face and breaking of legs and crucifixion. Justice for freed slaves: it demanded and won the abolition of at least one of the two major class distinctions in society, that between freedmen and citizens. Justice for women: the Church demanded and won legal rights for women. In Roman society a girl had passed from father to husband like a piece of property or an animal, without personal legal identity of her own. First the father, then the husband, had power of life and death over her. Christians led the fight for the emancipation of women.

But was even this enough? How can we boast of the church's part in the struggle for justice when it evaded the greatest injustice of all in that ancient world, the injustice of slavery? The whole social and economic structure of the Roman Empire was built on this evil foundation. One out of every four men was a slave. To attack slavery would be to attack the very organization of society. Should the Church launch such a revolution?

The idea was utterly foreign to the thinking of the Early Church. In the first place, it saw statism, not slavery, as the basic social problem--a rather keen insight, but one which was due undoubtedly to the fact that the demands of an absolute state conflicted more clearly with the demands of an absolute God than the institution of slavery, which admitted of at least a partial spiritual solution in that in Christ slave and free were declared equal. Slaves could even become bishops. Moreover, the Church balked at social revolution. Had not Paul declared, "The powers that be are ordained of God"?

Early Christians and Politics

As a matter of fact, in the early centuries at least, the Church balked at far less than revolution. It hesitated to allow Christians even to take political office. Some of the church fathers said it was a waste of time. "Let us lay the purple aside, and take off the scarlet, for it does not quiet the thirsty soul," wrote Methodius (On Life and Rational Action, chapter 6), advising Christians to hew to the line of spiritual, not political, action. Others warned that political entanglements meant spiritual compromise. "May I hold office?" asks the Christian. "Yes," replies Tertullian, about 200 A.D. (Idol. 17.i.97f), "if you will have nothing to do with sacrifices, public shows, criminal courts, and the sentencing of men to imprisonment or slavery or torture." And if the Christian exclaims, "But this is impossible," Tertullian was in agreement, "Exactly! Stay out of it!" He carries the argument farther. He says flatly, "Caesars cannot be Christians."

But Tertullian spoke too soon. In what was probably less than two years, in the year 202, a Christian king--the first Christian king of history, Abgar IX--sat on the throne of the little kingdom of Edessa. A hundred years before Constantine Christians came face to face with the problem of political power. It is all very well to tell Christians to stay out of politics, but what happens when you convert a king?

Unfortunately we don't know what happened to Abgar, but we do know what happened under Constantine. Christians pressed the fight for justice, as we have seen, and were active in all manner of social reforms, attempting in an organized way to change the world for the better by legislation and political pressure. But this brought them under fire from two directions. On the one

hand, they were accused of not going far enough in changing the world. There was still slavery. And on the other, they were accused of becoming so involved in the world that they ceased to be Christians.

There is truth in both criticisms. The hard fact of the matter is that the church's victory over Rome was not complete. It was only a partial victory whether we look at it from the standpoint of Christian faith or of social reform. When the Roman world accepted the Church, the Church in too great a measure accepted the world. But it does not at all follow, as many would assert, that the very evident loss in vitality of Christian faith was due to too much social action. It could be argued quite as plausibly that the Church fell after Constantine not because it tried to change the world for the better but simply because it fell too much in love with the world as it was.

At all events, the church's victory was at best a compromise, and in the following centuries Christians reacted to the compromise in two ways which can be conveniently symbolized by two figures: the Pope and the monk. The popes of Rome were captured by the hope that, if they could only control the world, they could change it. This led to the papacy's long struggle for temporal power. The goal was admirable--a Christian, though perhaps not perfect, world. The other reaction was that of monasticism, where again, as in the earliest Church, all things were had in common and a little circle of true believers either sought the kingdom of God on earth, while the rest of the world went by, or waited in earnest hope for the glorious return of Christ who alone could bring in the kingdom. The popes' way was a drive to power that might change the world. The monks' way was a retreat to a purity which could not be found in the world.

At this point history leaves us in a dilemma. We do not like the Constantinian compromise between Church and State. But neither do we feel quite comfortable about the two alternatives presented. The drive for power changed the Church more than it changed the world. And the monk, in his retreat to purity, failed to find the pure kingdom of God either within or without his monastery. Nor does it really solve the problem to say that we must wait for Christ's return. What do we do while we wait?

The Reformation did not change this picture as much as we might suppose. We can see the drive for power and the retreat to purity as well in Protestantism as in medieval Roman Catholicism; liberal, activist, social gospel groups, for example, on one side; and at the other extreme, sects like the Amish who won't even vote.

Toward the Solution

Is there any real solution for Christians? I don't dare to suggest that I have one, but I am going to suggest some lines which might lead to a solution:

1. Let us remember that the final solution will not be yours or mine or the church's or the state's--it will be God's, in fulfillment of the promise of the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. This leads to two further observations. In the first place, it should make Christians realistically aware of the ultimate inadequacy of any social reform, no matter how well planned and carried out. There will be no perfect world as long as there are imperfect men, and perfect men are not made by changing the environment. In the second place, it should mean no compromise with things as they are. The Christian can accept no social order as final and adequate, whether it be capitalist, socialist, com-

munist, or anything else, for all must come under the searching light of Christian judgment as human, and therefore incomplete, approaches to world problems which, in the end, will be resolved only by God.

2. But this must not lead to Christian irresponsibility for the social order. The fact that God alone brings in the kingdom does not relieve Christians of trying to achieve as perfect and as just a world order as is humanly possible in the present. If, in obedience to Christ's command, we really love our neighbors as ourselves, we cannot rest content in a society where human beings are in want or oppressed.

3. Once having accepted a Christian responsibility for the state of the world, the crucial problem remains: How do we go about improving this battered wreck of a sinful world? Let me make three general suggestions:

a. We must be on our guard against the tendency to rely solely on secular, social methods. No amount of juggling with the political and economic order will really make a Christian world. There will be no Christian social order without a world of Christians.

b. But we must also guard against relying solely on "spiritual" methods. If you say, "My social service program is prayer and saving souls," that is good as far as it goes, but it is only a start. What happens if you convert a king? Does he give up his kingdom for prayer and evangelism? Does a Christian farmer stop farming? And what should he think about land reforms? Evangelism is only the beginning of a Christian's responsibility to the social order. "Bread for myself," someone has said, "is a physical problem, but bread for my neighbor is a spiritual problem."

c. Above all, we must be on our guard against the use of unchristian methods. There is no place in Christian social action for the tempting axiom, "The end justifies the means." Both our goals and our methods must constantly be checked against the Biblical principles of love and justice.

This suggests a rough, but basic, pattern for Christian social reform. Not church control of politics. The Church doesn't know enough about politics. And not Christian withdrawal from the world, for our Lord sends us into the world. But rather, let the Church give clear guidance to its people on what the gospel's great social principles of love and justice really mean. And let every man in the work to which God has called him--be he king or carpenter, preacher or politician--so direct his work in the light of God's Word that love and justice may work their transforming way in the world through him, bestowing upon the social order insofar as it will receive them the blessed fruits of freedom and equality and peace. For only as we take this, our Christian duty, seriously, will we justify the proud boast of an earlier and a purer Church, "Christians are they who hold the world together." (Diogn. v. 7)

And only then, as James reminds us, will our faith be anything but dead, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead."

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